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ABSTRACT

A teacher study group was formed at Garfield Elementary School (Billings, Montana) to provide opportunities for professional development. Garfield Elementary has a student population of over 400 students, approximately 50 of whom qualify for special education services. The majority of children come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and represent various ethnic groups. Beginning with the 1992-93 school year, inclusion was initiated and all special education students were placed in regular classrooms. To meet student needs and promote collaboration among staff, a teacher study group was formed. Faculty from Eastern Montana College assisted in the development of the study group. Teachers met twice a month for 1 hour before school to discuss relevant topics and concerns, including interpersonal relations, situational leadership, clinical supervision, models of collaboration, modes of interaction, and dealing with change. Prior to the meetings, teachers reviewed journal articles related to the topic of the next meeting. During the meetings, teachers shared their reactions to the readings and attempted to relate what they read to their professional roles. At the end of the first semester, teachers indicated they appreciated the opportunity to discuss current educational topics with colleagues. The implementation of teacher study groups is especially relevant in rural areas where teachers experience professional isolation and stagnation. (LP)

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TEACHER STUDY GROUPS AS A MEANS OF RURAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Abstract

Teachers at Garfield Elementary School in Montana are implementing inclusive educational practice. With the inclusion of students with disabilities in regular education classrooms comes the need for intensive teacher teaming. In order to assess, understand, and structure their collaborative efforts, teachers have formed a study group. The group process has included scheduling meetings, choosing pertinent topics, securing current journal articles, discussion, practice, and debriefing. The Garfield teachers' study group experience serves as a model for providing the ongoing professional development difficult to achieve in remote, rural schools.

Introduction

Inclusive educational practice is sweeping our country. Inclusion is not synonymous with REI, but is an outgrowth of the Regular Education Initiative. In 1986, Madeline Will questioned the efficiency, and efficacy of the dual special /regular education framework in which we had been working since the 1975 passage of Public Law 94-142. She suggested a unified system which would include all students with mild disabilities in regular educational programs as an alternative. Such a system could improve the education of all students by joining the efforts of special and regular personnel in provision of programs. Inclusion grew from Will's original proposal. Parents, educators, and theorists began to question limiting unification to the education of students with mild disabilities. Seeing both academic and social growth of both regular and special students in inclusive settings, they asked, "Why not include students with severe disabilities as well?" The die was cast.

Recognizing their own dual system and in response to Will's (1986) proposal to unify regular and special education, the Billings School District #2 formed an REI Committee. During the 1990/91 and 1991/92 school years, the committee met on a regular basis to study the feasibility of including students with disabilities in regular education as the rule rather than the exception. In the spring of 1992, a proposal for inclusive education was presented to the school board.

Through a self-nomination and proposal process, Garfield Elementary School was chosen as the pilot inclusion site for the district. Garfield maintains a population of over 400 students, approximately 50 of whom qualify for special education services. The majority of children come from a lower socioeconomic background and represent varied ethnicity. Beginning in the 1992/93 school year, all students were placed in regular classrooms. Special education teachers,

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previously providing pull-out services began collaborating with regular educators in the regular settings. As a Professional Development School, Garfield receives additional assistance from Eastern Montana College in the form of faculty participation and as a site for preservice student field experiences.

Although a moral basis for, and positive outcomes of Inclusion have been posited (Goodlad, 1993; Stainback & Stainback, 1990), promoting positive staff attitudes, communication between and among teachers, and collegial relationships are essential to assure successful implementation of the practice. Regular teachers are sometimes threatened by the presence of another teacher in their classrooms on a full time basis, and special education teachers feel disenfranchised without their own resource rooms and students. A school faculty has to redefine roles and develop the rapport necessary for close working relationships.

History of Garfield Study Group Development

With total inclusion at Garfield Elementary has come the need for increased teacher interaction and cooperation. The resource or self-contained special education teachers have abandoned the security of their own classrooms and accepted the challenge of working side-by-side with regular educators in the regular class. This role release on the part of both teachers has not occurred without self-doubt, feelings of disenfranchisement, and defense of personal turf. Although accustomed to working together on a more limited basis, and used to many visitors in and out of their rooms, the teachers felt a need for guidance, affirmation of their inclusionary efforts, and increased professional interaction.

Several options were explored for teacher professional development. Garfield, being in Billings, had ready access to Eastern Montana College. Most of the staff had earned Masters degrees. Taking additional classes on campus did not seem pertinent to their needs. As a Professional Development School, Garfield was developing even closer ties with EMC. Two EMC faculty persons worked at Garfield weekly, and the school hosted a large number of sophomore practicum students, junior field experience students, and student teachers each semester. The possibility of offering undergraduate or graduate classes on site at Garfield was explored, but because of the large number of teachers with post baccalaureate degrees, this option was deemed unnecessary. What the teachers seemed to want was a less structured format and a more relaxed environment for professional dialog. A teacher study group seemed to be the answer.

During the 1992/93 school year, a group was piloted during spring semester. Teachers from Riverside Middle School, another PDS site, near Garfield, were invited to join Garfield teachers to form a study group. The group met once a month in February and March after school. In February, the study group process was described and possible topics for discussion were explored. In March, the group convened to discuss developing a sense of community among students. The scheduled April meeting never happened. There are several possible reasons for the group's demise. First, after school meetings are not optimal for teachers. Everyone seemed to be exhausted and not ready to tackle a

cognitive challenge, regardless of interest. Second, members of the group seemed to have divergent agendas, as demonstrated by the large number of topics initially posited. Third, the group may have been too large to support professional dialogue. Or perhaps the teachers did not know each other well enough and did not have the trust in each other necessary for honest discussion.

The study group idea remained viable, however, and has been resurrected during the current school year. This time, teachers at Garfield and those at Riverside convened at their own schools. Garfield folks decided on teacher collaboration as their focus; those at Riverside are studying cooperative learning. Both groups are meeting before school, when teachers are fresh. This school year, with an early meeting time and group specific topics, the study groups are alive and well!

Garfield's Study Group Process

The teachers and interested student teachers at Garfield Elementary School meet two Tuesdays each month from 7:30AM until 8:20AM. The group decided on collaboration as their topic focus. The group's schedule of topics follows:

1993/94 Collaboration Study Group Monthly Topics

SEPTEMBER	
	14--Gen Intro and Organization 28--Topic Schedule
OCTOBER	
	12--Adult Development 26--Personal Observation
NOVEMBER	
	9--Interpersonal Relations 23--Personal Observation
DECEMBER	
	7--Situational Leadership 21--Personal Experience
JANUARY	
	11--Clinical Supervision 26--Personal Application
FEBRUARY	
	8--Models of Collaboration 22--Personal Application
MARCH	
	8--Modes of Interaction 22--Personal Application
APRIL	
	5--Change 19--Wrap-up and Projections

Possible subtopics were presented to the group as was a reference list of books and journal articles. The study group decided on the order of topic presentation and selected articles of interest.

EMC faculty, who work at Garfield as their PDS site, collect, xerox and distribute the articles for each month. At first, several selections were given to the teachers at each meeting to be reviewed for discussion at the next. This routine was overwhelming participants, so selections for each month are now distributed at the beginning of the month. Participants can now read articles of particular interest at their personal convenience.

The group convenes early with coffee supplied by Garfield and treats supplied by EMC. As the coffee takes effect, participants share reactions to the readings. Teachers attempt to relate what they have read to their professional roles. Conversation is alternately lively or subdued, depending on the topic, the weather, the school schedule, or any number of other extraneous variables. Topics are not covered in depth, and closure is not an issue. At the end of the first semester, Garfield teachers were asked to respond to three open ended statements:

I enjoyed...
I appreciated...
I wish...

Of the twelve teachers participating, nine responded. By and large, the teachers enjoyed the opportunity to discuss current educational topics with fellow professionals. They appreciated the involvement of EMC faculty in their group, the organization of the group by EMC folks, and the treats! Coffee and doughnuts always seem to make things better... They wished for fewer articles, with in depth discussion of each, and freer conversation about the problems they are encountering with inclusion.

The two EMC faculty members who participate in the study group initially had a more aggressive purpose. Being university types, accustomed to teaching graduate classes, they had hoped for a read→respond→implement→reflect sequence through which they could demonstrate a difference in teacher practice as a result of study group participation. At this point, the faculty agenda has not been realized, but that does not seem to matter. What is significant, is that twelve teachers have consistently participated in the study group, others have expressed an interest, and teachers are wishing for more depth in the discussion of the topics.

Application to Rural Schools

Montana is the nation's fourth largest state, but ranks close to last in population and averages only five persons per square mile. Seven Native American Indian reservations contribute approximately six percent of the state's population total. Montanans live on ranches, in one of the six population centers (of which the largest has only 80,000 inhabitants), or in one of the 500 other small communities in the state. The state's many small communities are not only "rural", but also are isolated by distance, weather conditions, geographic barriers, and poor access. The problems associated with remoteness are even greater than those of simple rurality. While land and open spaces have long characterized Montana as "Big Sky Country," it is this same vastness and openness that presents Montana with many of her most complex educational

problems. Not the least of these is recruiting teachers to sparsely populated, remote areas, and retaining them in a rural school when they begin to experience professional isolation and stagnation.

Garfield Elementary, serving a multiethnic student clientele in a low socioeconomic area, is a microcosm of Montana as a whole. Involving students of diverse backgrounds, and abilities in regular education classrooms brought teachers together in collaborative teams to meet individual student needs. Just as Garfield teachers formed a professional study group to improve their own collaborative practice, rural teachers can come together for professional dialogue. The issue of providing professional development in remote, rural areas poses sometimes formidable obstacles. Forming a group to investigate issues of professional interest can alleviate the frustration and stagnation often experienced by teachers in rural schools.

Patience is essential in allowing the study group to evolve. After two semesters (spring and fall), with the luxury of college faculty guidance and the input of educational specialists, the Garfield group is ready for in-depth discussions. It took one semester for the study group idea itself to be realized, and another to build group rapport. Perhaps after another semester, teachers will want to apply group topics to their daily practice, and will be willing to debrief their experiences. In another year, teachers may be encouraged to write their experiences in the form of case studies. The process may take even longer to evolve in small rural schools where teachers lack daily encounters with specialized personnel and consistent guidance from college faculty.

Limitations notwithstanding, if a school has two teachers with common interests and the willingness to commit time, a study group can be formed. The teachers investigate areas of common interest and potential growth. A literature review can be conducted long distance through computer access and articles secured through interlibrary loan. The group meets on a regularly scheduled basis, discusses the article(s) secured, implements suggested practice, and debriefs experiences. However, even if teachers never implement the practices which they investigate and discuss, the professional dialogue itself reenergizes. This process can provide an avenue of continued professional growth and renewal in the rural "outback".

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